

Big Water Bulletin

April/May 2009



**US Army Corps
of Engineers**
Jacksonville District

The **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District**, specializes in the planning, engineering, construction and management of large infrastructure projects in Florida and the Caribbean. The Corps' mission includes flood control and water management; navigation; shore protection and restoration; environmental restoration; hazardous, toxic and radioactive remediation; military support and emergency support. The Army Corps of Engineers built the Central and Southern Florida Flood Control Project 50 years ago at the state of Florida's request and with the authorization of the United States Congress.

Join us April 25 for Earth Day in Pahokee!

Join the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and local officials for an **Earth Day 2009** celebration at the Pahokee Marina on Saturday, April 25. It will be a fun event for the entire family!

Activities include viewing original artwork by local elementary school students, games, multimedia presentations about the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee, free refreshments, barbecue and conch dinners as local fundraisers, and a visit to the new marina.

Earth Day 2009 will be held from **11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday, April 25** at the **Pahokee Marina/Lake Okeechobee Outpost**, 190 North Lake Way, Pahokee, Fla. The event is free. For more information, call 305-948-8063 or 561-503-9466.



The Corps nursery was custom built to raise aquatic plants for Lake Okeechobee.

Corps builds plant nursery in Moore Haven

Native plants are the lifeblood of Lake Okeechobee. They clean water, remove nutrients, provide a home for fish, birds and other wildlife, and reduce erosion from waves.

These native plants face many challenges. A drought or prolonged high waters can wipe out many, sediment-laced water can block sunlight and harm or kill plants, and non-native vegetation can crowd out native vegetation.

It is a year-round battle to maintain and protect Lake Okeechobee's valuable plants. This past December, the **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District** added one more weapon to its arsenal to help protect and restore native lake vegetation. The Corps built a one-of-a-kind plant nursery on the shore of Lake Okeechobee in Moore Haven to cultivate native plants for placement in the lake.

The **South Florida Operations Office Aquatic Plant Nursery** was designed by the Corps and cost about \$25,000 to construct.

The nursery is unique because it uses water taken directly out of the lake. "Parent" plants are carefully gathered from the lake and placed in one of 12 tanks. Lake water slowly flows through the tanks, recreating the natural physical and chemical conditions found in the lake, such as temperature, turbidity, pH (potential of hydrogen), alkalinity, and other factors. The "offspring" plants are raised in the nursery. When mature enough – generally after six to eight weeks – they are transplanted into areas of Lake Okeechobee. The young plants are initially surrounded by a protective cage in the lake, preventing herbivores such as turtles from harming them.

The major focus of the nursery is the cultivation of submerged aquatic vascular plants to supplement certain areas where these plant populations have decreased.

"Submerged vegetation is the lifeblood of the lake," said Jon Morton, a Corps biologist in the South Florida Operations Office in Clewiston. "The plants trap sediment, provide feeding areas for fish, and shelter smaller organisms."

The first two plants to be cultivated are Illinois pondweed (*Potamogeton illinoensis*) and eelgrass (*Vallisneria americana*). The facility also will be used to conduct research on non-native plants affecting the lake, such as the recent significant find of rice grass (*Luziola subintegra*), discovered for the first time in North America in Fisheating Bay.

The first crop of new plants is expected to be transplanted to Lake Okeechobee in May 2009. For more information, call Jon Morton at 863-983-8101.

What's on your mind? Mali Chamness, the mayor of Clewiston

Mali Chamness' parents moved to the area in 1961 from Cuba, and she grew up in Clewiston. Her parents, brother and sister still live in the area, too. The mayor loves the city and believes it can have a bright future.

When asked what she thinks about federal and state efforts to restore the Everglades and protect Lake Okeechobee, the mayor cites the proposed acquisition of **U.S. Sugar Corp.** property by the **South Florida Water Management District** as being foremost on her mind. While supportive of Everglades restoration efforts, she explains that the proposed acquisition will fundamentally change the face of the Glades communities. She sums up her thoughts in three statements:

First, the state of Florida needs to develop an economic transition plan to move the Glades communities from wholly agriculturally-based to a more diverse economy.

Second, policy makers must recognize that restoration of the Everglades starts at the headwaters of the Kissimmee River, and not south of Lake Okeechobee. Water quality and storage issues north of the lake, and water quality within the lake, are essential to the health of the entire ecosystem.

Third, today there are too many questions and not enough answers.



Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness

Getting to know the Corps

Working on the largest lake east of Mississippi attracts Corps biologist



Jon Morton pauses for a quiet moment on the lake.

When **Jon Morton** speaks, his southern accent is unmistakable. He speaks in slow, soft and polite phrases. It is clear he has strong roots in the south.

Morton isn't too far from his Mississippi roots. He is an aquatic biologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District's **South Florida Operations Office** in **Clewiston**. He spends most of his time treating and removing non-native plants in the lake and growing plants at an aquatic nursery.

A recent college graduate, this is Morton's first full-time job out of college. So far, he's enjoying the experience.

Morton grew up in Fulton, Miss., and had planned to follow his father's footsteps and be a football coach, until the lure of the outdoors became too great. He majored in wildlife science at Mississippi State University and was a cooperative education student with the Corps, working nearby on Sardis Lake.

After graduating from college in August 2005, Morton accepted a full-time job with the Corps to work on Lake Okeechobee. He wanted to be involved in the "largest lake east of the Mississippi" – and his involvement quickly became baptism by fire!

In the first three months he was on the job, Hurricane Katrina raised awareness about dike stability issues, and then Hurricane Wilma raised the lake level to nearly 18 feet. Morton was dealing with cultural, environmental and political issues all at once, as a staff member of the Corps. "As best as you can, you develop an understanding of the complexities of the issues," he said.

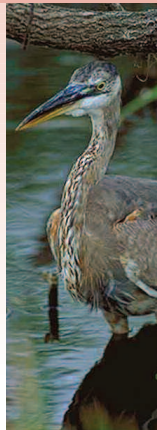
Today, he is enjoying his role as a field biologist, and spends a lot of time on the lake. The nursery in Moore Haven is one of his favorite projects. When he is not on the job, he continues to enjoy being out on the water, but on his free time he prefers the coastal saltwater flats where he trolls for snook, redfish and sea trout. And, although Morton may miss his roots in Mississippi, he is developing deep roots in the area. On June 27, he will marry Clewiston resident Jamie Combass, a registered nurse at the local hospital.

To Learn More

Both CERP and the dike strengthening project will take years to complete. There are many ways to keep informed and get involved. Both have Web sites, newsletters, and public meetings.

The Corps of Engineers has an active community outreach program around the lake, too. To learn more, visit www.saj.usace.army.mil or call 1-800-291-9405.

For more information about Everglades restoration and how it affects you, visit www.evergladesplan.org or call 1-877-CERP-USA.



The Journey to Restore America's Everglades

A partnership of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, South Florida Water Management District and many other federal, state, local and tribal partners.



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